

# Rorty, Putnam, and the Pragmatist View of Epistemology and Metaphysics

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Although Dewey's influence has remained strong amongst the community of educators, his reputation amongst philosophers has had a remarkably volatile history. He was unquestionably the most influential figure in American philosophy until his death in 1952. Almost immediately after his death, however, Dewey's writings almost completely disappeared from the American philosophy syllabus. They were replaced by the analytic philosophers of the logical positivist tradition, who thought that philosophical problems could be solved by unraveling puzzles that came from a lack of understanding of proper language use. After several decades, however, the inadequacies of this view became unavoidably obvious, and the next generation of analytically trained philosophers began to find themselves saying things that sounded remarkably like Dewey. Many analytic philosophers began to use the word "pragmatist" to describe some aspect of their positions: Quine, Churchland, Davidson, Feyerabend, Rorty, Putnam, among many others. Putnam and Rorty, in particular, have made a serious effort to restudy the original pragmatist texts, and reinterpret them for use in modern contexts. Not everyone is satisfied with their reinterpretations, however. Rorty, in particular has been criticized in some detail by Dewey scholars (see especially Saatkamp, 1995). But Rorty admits that his ideas differ significantly from Dewey's, because he is trying to revive only those aspects of Dewey's ideas which are relevant for our times. I will argue, however, that those aspects of pragmatism which Rorty claims are the most relevant are actually the most out of date, and vice versa.

The pragmatists were caught between two different philosophical movements and were equally critical of both. On the one hand, they were reacting against nineteenth century idealist philosophy, which often got hung up in metaphysical disputes that had no possibility of being resolved. But on the other hand, they were equally critical of the positivist's belief that it was possible to not do metaphysics. Nineteenth century idealist philosophy is a dead horse in the twenty-first century, and thus the pragmatist's arguments against it are of relatively little use today. But analytic philosophy has lived under the spell of positivism for over a half a century, and still has not figured out what should go in its place. Rorty captures this dilemma quite well when he refers to philoso-

phers like Quine, Sellars and Davidson as "post-analytic philosophers." The pragmatist alternative to positivism is an alternative which many of these post-analytic philosophers have been drifting towards. But as long as we assume that the pragmatist's contributions to metaphysics and epistemology should be ignored, I believe that we will not be able to free ourselves from the last reverberations of the positivist hangover.

In this paper, I will examine some of the modern debates between pragmatism and so-called "realism," especially those between Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam. My claim is that many of these debates are based on misunderstandings of the pragmatist tradition. If we rely on Dewey's original ideas, rather than Rorty's reinterpretations of Dewey, these problems can be radically transformed, and in many cases dissolved.

## *The Rorty-Putnam Debate*

In the debate between pragmatists and realists, Rorty is currently seen as the most adamant spokesman for pragmatism. Putnam is seen as slightly to the "epistemological right" of Rorty, because although he speaks highly of pragmatism, he considers his position to be less pragmatist, and more realist, than Rorty's. This balance between pragmatism and realism is nicely expressed in the title of Putnam's book "Realism with a Human Face." This title is not just an historical reference to Czechoslovakian socialism. Putnam's realism acknowledges that knowledge is always from a human's, never a God's eye, view. Reality, in other words, necessarily has a human face, for it makes no sense for us to talk about a reality which is completely independent of our human lives and activities. However, Putnam differentiates himself from Rorty by saying that he, unlike Rorty, believes that there is a reality which exists independently of our beliefs about it. Putnam argues that we cannot avoid claiming that some beliefs are warranted (i.e., justified, in some sense), and others are not, and that this distinction only makes sense if we accept that reality is somehow independent of our beliefs about it.

Putnam's main argument is that Rorty's position contradicts itself, and other concepts that run so deeply in us that we cannot possibly think without them (see Putnam, 1990, pp. 21-24). We cannot say that a warranted belief is merely what most people believe, because this contradicts the very idea of warrant itself. To say that a belief is warranted must mean that one should believe it regardless of whether anyone else does. Similarly he says that "it is internal to our picture of reform that whether the outcome of a change is good (a reform) or bad (its opposite) is logically independent of whether it seems good or bad" (p. 24). Putnam admits that the fact that we find it impossible to think without a concept does not in itself prove that the concept is valid. But Rorty is apparently saying that we should reject traditional realism because it is a bad theory, even though the majority of people currently believe it. And once he makes this move, Putnam claims that he contradicts himself "what can 'bad' possibly mean here but 'based on a wrong metaphysical picture'" (p. 22)?

I think that Putnam is right that there are conceptual incoherencies in Rorty's arguments, and that some of them do involve the old logical positivist error of formulating a metaphysics/epistemology that denies it is a metaphysics/epistemology. One of the things I will be doing in this paper is providing more detailed arguments to support Putnam's claim that "Just saying 'that's a pseudo-issue' is not of itself therapeutic; it is an aggressive form of the metaphysical disease itself" (ibid., p. 20). But I will also be making two other claims, one of which supports Putnam against Rorty, and the other of which criticizes both Putnam and Rorty almost equally.

The first of these claims is that Rorty is guilty of another incoherency besides contradiction: he is using arguments which do not actually support the position he claims they support. Unlike many of Rorty's Critics, Putnam and I both believe that most Rorty's more controversial premises are true. But I will argue that the inferences from those premises that supposedly lead to Rorty's conclusions are actually invalid. His main argument for the abandonment of the questions of epistemology is that a certain answer to these questions has been shown to be unsatisfactory. But it does not follow from this fact that therefore epistemology itself should be abandoned. For if Rorty is only critiquing particular answers to epistemological questions, this has no impact on the validity of the epistemological enterprise itself.

My second claim is that both Putnam and Rorty are equally mistaken in claiming that the most important thing we can learn from pragmatist philosophy is how to cure "the metaphysical disease." On the contrary, I think that the biggest need in modern analytical philosophy is learning how to cure the anti-metaphysical disease, which made its first appearance in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and had its most

extreme form in the logical positivists and in both the early and late Wittgenstein. Rorty's so-called pragmatism is actually the last gasp of this anti-metaphysical disease, and I believe that the epistemological and metaphysical writings of James and Dewey could offer something like a cure for it. Even the late Wittgenstein believed that the purpose of philosophizing was to show how to get the fly out of the fly-bottle which is metaphysical/epistemological paradox, and Rorty is still struggling to get out of that fly bottle. James and Dewey believed that we could never get out of the fly bottle and therefore we must learn how to struggle with the metaphysical/epistemological questions as best we can.

Putnam does recognize that to some degree these philosophical questions are unavoidable, but he sees this as a realist position that makes him less of a pragmatist. The reason he calls his position "realism with a small r" is that he accepts that "the enterprises of providing a foundation for being and knowledge . . . are enterprises that have disastrously failed" (Putnam, 1990, p. 19). But he considers it to be realist, and not pragmatist, to say that that "reconstructive reflection does not lose its value just because the dream of a total and unique reconstruction of our system of belief is hopelessly utopian" (ibid., p. 25) and "the illusions that philosophy spins are illusions that belong to the nature of human life itself" (ibid., p. 20). In fact, the original pragmatists would actually have agreed with the first of these quotes, and disagreed with the second only in a certain sense. They believed that human life requires us to accept some sort of philosophical 'illusion,' but they did not believe that it was impossible to escape the particular philosophical positions that have shaped our thinking so far. They thought that reconstructive reflection could produce new philosophical assumptions which would make us more at home in the world, and lead us into fewer errors, than the ones we have now, even if those philosophical assumptions were not "the truth" in the realist sense. They were, in other words, "philosophical revisionists" in the sense that Putnam says he is not (ibid., p. 20).<sup>[1]</sup>

One is not likely to see this if one uses Rorty as one's main source for pragmatist insights, for he refers to books like James' "Essays in Radical Empiricism" and Dewey's "Experience and Nature," as "pretty useless, to my mind" (Rorty, 1994, p. 320n). These books contain some of the best expressions of pragmatist metaphysics and epistemology, and ignoring them is to lose an essential part of the pragmatist worldview. When we take a close look at Rorty's critiques of the epistemological enterprise, we can see that he simply ignores pragmatist epistemology, and thus closes off what is perhaps the most fruitful new perspective on the subject. This is why he assumes that once he has disposed of the pre-pragmatist answers to the metaphysical questions, he has disposed of the questions themselves. This is also why he is unable to see that he himself is still hanging on to highly

questionable epistemological assumptions, which he himself cannot question because he refuses to explicitly think about epistemology.

### *On Confusing the Question with the Answer*

Reading Rorty often gives a sense that philosophy is an enterprise which has come to the end of its tether, whose only task left is to find a way of committing suicide in the most dignified manner possible. We must refrain from argument, he says, and content ourselves with only having conversations. We must avoid trying to answer any of the questions that have concerned philosophers, or even trying to prove that they cannot be answered. And we must refrain from trying to change our fundamental beliefs about reality, or from searching for justifications for keeping them. I think, however, that most of this doom and gloom comes from a single mistake: Rorty's claim that doing epistemology is not asking a kind of question, but giving a kind of answer, and/or claiming that it is possible for those answers to be apodictically certain. To some degree, Rorty is aware that he is doing this, which is why it is hard to tell exactly what he is saying we should stop doing, and why we should stop doing it. He says that no one would deny that we can always ask Sellars' question "how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term." He calls this philosophy, and contrasts it with Philosophy (with a capital "P"). When he talks about the differences between these two, however, it looks like he is defining Capital-P Philosophy not by the questions it asks, but by the answers it gives. And if he is only critiquing particular answers to epistemological questions, this has no impact on the validity of the epistemological enterprise itself.

For example, Rorty says that one of the characteristics of Philosophy is the hope that we can "believe more truths or do more good or be more rational by knowing more about Truth or Goodness or Rationality" (Rorty, 1982, p. xvi). He claims that even Anti-Platonists like Hobbes and the logical positivists practiced Philosophy in this sense, because they still believed that "the assemblage of true statements should be thought of as divided into a lower and an upper division, the division between (in Plato's terms) mere opinion and genuine knowledge" (ibid.). He calls all thought that presupposes the belief that there is such a division "epistemology," and says that once we have given up the possibility of finding something that all true sentences have in common, we have changed the subject, and are no longer doing epistemology.

Rorty is correct when he says that most epistemologists have agreed on this point, even when they have disagreed about everything else. But because I don't agree with this point myself, this sentence sounds to me like "You are not really an astronomer if you are not trying to find out what

turns the crystal spheres." I believe that there is a continuum, not a line, between this lower and upper division, and that true statements are related to each other by family resemblance, not by all possessing a single set of essential properties. I could be wrong about either or both of these points, but I am clearly making an epistemological claim when I say them, and anyone who has a conversation with me about this subject will be making other epistemological claims. If I try to articulate the various activities and qualities that various true statements have (for example, if I say that true statements are always useful) what I am doing is epistemology. If I say that the sole essential property of true statements is that they are all useful, and therefore demand that no more be said about the subject, I am also doing epistemology.

This last position is ironically more essentialist than the positions of those of us who want to continue talking about epistemology, for it asserts that all true statements have this one property of usefulness and no other. If we assume that true statements are related by family resemblance, rather than by a set of essential properties, then the epistemologist's task would be to create a list of characteristics that are often shared by many true statements, and then try to understand which ones are likely to cluster together, and which ones are mutually exclusive. This assumption would not require us to give up talking about truth altogether. The fact that Aristotle did not believe that there is a single essence that all good things have in common did not stop him from writing ethics. For that matter, it is now widely believed that the categories that we use to classify plants and animals into species are family resemblances, yet no one who believes this thinks that we should therefore refrain from doing botany and zoology (see Dupre, 1993 and Lakoff, 1987). [2]

When we look at what Rorty says about the relationship between epistemology and empirical psychology in 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,' we can see that he makes similar mistakes in most of his arguments. In the chapter titled "Epistemology and Empirical Psychology" (Rorty, 1979, pp. 213-256), Rorty says that naturalized epistemology cannot "aid in maintaining the image of philosophy as a discipline which stands apart from empirical inquiry" (p. 220). But why should it, and why should this be a problem for epistemology so serious that it would require us to abandon it altogether? I think Rorty sees the problem as being that the sciences do have specialized domains and that if philosophy doesn't have one it must not be a legitimate enterprise (hence his frequent use of the pejorative "dilettante" to describe the condition of the modern philosopher). But the creation of cognitive science shows that at least some scientists have now learned that all disciplines are separated from each other only by differences in degree. Yet no one says we should stop doing linguistics or neuroscience because neither one will be able to fully understand language without consulting the other.



If we accept (as I think Rorty does) that the exact divisions between all scientific specialties are decided by social convention rather than by where nature has placed carvable joints, why is there any problem with the fact that the specialized borders of philosophy are drawn vertically (by levels of abstraction) rather than horizontally (by subject matter)? This is basically the point that Haack makes when she says that "giving up the idea that philosophy is distinguished by its a priori character encourages a picture of philosophy as continuous with science. . . but this does not oblige one to deny that there is a difference in degree between science and philosophy" (Haack, 1993, p. 188). [3]

In another section of Rorty 1979 entitled 'Epistemological Behaviorism,' Rorty claims that "Epistemological behaviorism. . . has nothing to do with Watson or with Ryle" (p. 176). The reason is that "We can take the Sellars-Quine attitude towards knowledge while cheerfully 'countenancing' raw feels, a priori concepts, innate ideas, sense data, propositions, and anything else which a causal explanation of human behavior might find it helpful to postulate" (p. 177). It is difficult to square Rorty's acceptance of "lush metaphysical landscapes" (ibid.) with his continual assertions that he wants there to be no alternative to epistemology, only a change of subject. The above list contains essentially every theoretical term discussed in the history of epistemology. What then does Rorty mean when he says that we should not do epistemology? "Behaviorism in epistemology is a matter not of metaphysical parsimony, but whether authority can attach to assertions by virtue of relations of 'acquaintance' . . ." (ibid.). Rorty claims, in other words, that all epistemologies must accept that knowledge has foundations, or they are not worthy of the name. But although this is certainly a popular epistemological position, it is not the only possible position on this issue. No one would claim that to say dinosaurs are reptiles is doing paleontology, but to say they are birds is not to do paleontology. Two different answers to the same question are talking about the same subject, even (perhaps especially) if they say different things about that subject.

### *Rorty's Reactionary Positivism*

Rorty is not merely changing the subject the way he would be if he interrupted an epistemological discussion by saying "how about those Niners!!" He is not content to simply stop talking about epistemology, he wants to assert that there is something wrong about continuing to do so, and something right about stopping. And any such assertion contains (at least dimly) some presuppositions about this activity that should be stopped, or it would make no sense. Rorty almost acknowledges this when he describes what he now does by saying things like "hermeneutics is always parasitic upon the possibility (and perhaps upon the actuality) of epistemology"

(Rorty, 1979, p. 366) and "edifying philosophers have to de-  
cry the very notion of having a view, while avoiding having a  
view about having views" (ibid., p. 371) After the second  
quote, Rorty adds "this is an awkward, but not impossible  
position." But impossible is precisely the right word for this  
position, for it contains essentially the same contradiction as  
the Logical Positivist claim that "all non-empirical, non-  
tautologous statements are meaningless, except for this one."

Because there are so many contradictions in Rorty's  
attempt to shut down epistemology, I think we ought to take  
him at his word the one time he denies allegiance to meta-  
physical parsimony, and ignore the numerous times he en-  
dorses it. He should then be willing to add a few caveats about  
fallibilism to the beginning of "Experience and Nature," and  
then accept it (and other works of epistemology) as manifes-  
tations of a valid enterprise (i.e., worth criticizing, rather than  
merely dismissing with a change of subject). To some de-  
gree, my recommendation is the mirror image of Rorty's  
analysis of Dewey in his "Dewey between Hegel and Dar-  
win." The pragmatists were, as Rorty points out in this essay,  
highly ambivalent about the epistemological enterprise.

James and Dewey, alas, never made up their minds whether  
they wanted just to forget about epistemology or whether they  
wanted to devise a new improved epistemology of their own.  
In my view they should have opted for forgetting. (pp. 59-60)

What I am claiming is that Rorty has made a similar  
equivocation, and that in my view he should opt for devising  
a new improved epistemology. Rorty is already making epis-  
temological assumptions when he asserts that epistemologi-  
cal questions have no answers, or that it is possible to change  
the subject when epistemological questions come up, or that  
the only possible answer to "what is truth" is "whatever is set  
by social practices." His attempt to be operationalist and posi-  
tivist about epistemology fails for the same basic reason  
that Skinner's behaviorism and Carnap's positivism fails: we  
cannot assume that we are not making theoretical assump-  
tions simply because we have stopped deliberately theoriz-  
ing. In Rorty 1982, he remarks that many people think of  
pragmatism as being just a namby-pamby sort of positivism.  
What I am arguing is that to some degree, Rorty's pragma-  
tism really is just a namby-pamby sort of positivism. Part of  
what makes it namby-pamby is that it is not supported by the  
dogmatic scientism of the positivists. This makes Rorty far  
more tolerant of alternative world-views than the positivists  
ever were, which is a virtue I admire. But without the foun-  
dation of sense data that made positivism a form of realism,  
Rorty's anti-metaphysical bias collapses into a kind of  
subjective idealism.

In fact, if I were to come up with a single phrase to  
describe Rorty's epistemology, I would call it "Idealism in

denial." This is most obvious when he says things like this:

Epistemological Behaviorism. . . can best be seen as a species of holism-but one that requires no idealist metaphysical underpinnings. (Rorty, 1979, p. 174)

To retain the idealist's holism while junking their metaphysics, all we need to do is to renounce the ambition of transcendence. (Rorty, 1993, p. 190)

Unfortunately, once we have accepted holism, transcendence is no longer an ambition, it is a duty and a curse. Holism accepts that all entities from gods to physical objects presuppose a reference to transcendent assumptions, even if those assumptions are not universal and apodictic. We can't escape this by saying that if we had opinions on this subject we would be idealists, and then coyly add that of course we don't have such opinions. We may, however, be able to escape idealism if we can formulate an alternative to it, and this is what Dewey and James were trying to do in 'Experience and Nature' and 'Essays in Radical Empiricism' respectively. Despite what Rorty and the positivists believe, the only cure for epistemology is more epistemology.

### *Pragmatism and Epistemology*

How then should we do epistemology from a pragmatist perspective? Part of the answer, I believe must be found by philosophizing about philosophy itself. This is not just a matter of justifying our profession to our peers in order to increase respect and grants. The relationship between fact and theory, the concrete and the abstract, is one of the central questions of epistemology. Our philosophy of knowledge is certainly incomplete if we don't understand the relationship between philosophy, (which—arguably—tries to be the most abstract discipline of all), and other more concrete branches of knowledge. And I believe that a genuinely pragmatist view of philosophy will ultimately grant a measure of epistemic virtue to the philosophy that preceded it, just as it grants epistemic virtue to any system of thought that serves a human need.

Because we must philosophize, for better or worse, philosophers should give up trying to make fundamental changes in what they have been doing. They must instead try to get a better understanding of what they have been doing all along, so they can develop realistic criteria for distinguishing good philosophy from bad. Kant set very ambitious goals for himself, and in terms of those goals he was a failure. And yet (I can't help saying this with a Yiddish accent) "We all should be such failures." Kant clearly succeeded at something, and was more successful at it than any undergraduate term paper or Ph.D. thesis written on the same topics. And yet we as philosophers do not have any way of expressing what it was

that Kant succeeded in doing. This is why we continue to flagellate ourselves, thinking the way to self-improvement is to continue to try to do less. Rorty's attempted dismissal of epistemology is, I hope, the last gasp of this futile and self-destructive strategy, which was begun by Kant's Critiques and carried even further by the logical positivists.

This does not mean that all metaphysical and epistemological writings are of equal value. There is no denying that many of the metaphysical excesses of certain debates in contemporary analytic philosophy are every bit as bad as those of nineteenth century philosophy. Putnam gives an example of such a debate between Quine, Lewis, and Kripke on p. 26-27 of Putnam 1990. I think that Putnam is correct in claiming that the best way of dealing with these kinds of excesses is to perform something like what James called cash-value analysis. This is essentially what Putnam is doing when he considers whether there are any other significant implications to these claims, and when he decides that there are not, concludes that "No one, not even God {can answer such a question}. . . and not because there is something He doesn't know" (ibid.). But Dewey and James never asserted that all metaphysical claims lack cash value. On the contrary, they believed that all discourse presupposes some kind of metaphysical claims, and that this was what made it possible for us to think rationally at all.

How then does one identify philosophical claims which have cash value? No pragmatist would claim that there was a single necessary and sufficient definition which could answer that question. The bulk of my answer will be two very specific examples, one from Dewey's work and one from modern philosophy, which will hopefully make these principles clear. Before I become more specific, I must say something about the abstractions that those examples are meant to exemplify. For the pragmatist view of the relationship between concreta and abstracta is very different from the traditional realist view.

### *The Pragmatist View of the Relationship Between Knowledge and Human Activity*

Pragmatists claims that when language is used in human inquiry, the goal of the language user is to facilitate the achievement of the goals of other human activities. It does this by making abstract commitments about the entities encountered while performing those other activities. Because these commitments are abstract extrapolations from what is experienced, they make it possible for the inquirer to change that activity in radical and productive ways, sometimes so radically that it becomes necessary to give the changed activity a whole new name. This is probably why human beings are so much better at learning than any other animal.

Language enables us to take what we have learned through the experience of performing one kind of activity, and apply it to a completely different activity. It is the abstract nature of language which enables us to make use of one kind of experience in a variety of different contexts.

However, the epistemic merit of these various abstractions is not determined by mere agreement within the community of language users. If one set of epistemological commitments leads its believers into fewer and/or less dangerous errors than some other set, the former has greater epistemic merit. And this epistemic merit is an independent fact, which holds even if no one in the community of language users is aware of it. There are many reasons why a community might decide to cling to a bad theory—stubbornness, fear, social prejudice against those who advance alternatives. But if one theory leads its believers into more serious errors than another possible competitor, that theory is epistemically inferior to its competitor even if the community remains in denial about these errors. This is why Rorty is wrong when he says that the only criterion by which we can evaluate our theories is agreement within the community. Note, however, that we do not have to posit a world that is independent of human activities in order to make this claim. We need only posit that there are human activities other than language, and that it is possible for language to prescribe courses of action which cause those activities to be (in varying degrees) either successful or unsuccessful on their own terms. The difference between 1) an epistemology which enables a practitioner to obtain the goals of that practice and 2) an epistemology which routinely leads a practitioner into errors, is a real and measurable cash value difference between the two epistemologies. And this difference does not disappear simply because a community has failed to notice it.

Rorty's inability to make the distinction between genuine cash value and community consensus is one more example of his affinity with positivism and estrangement from traditional pragmatism. Rorty admits that his pragmatism is one that "got a new lease on life by undergoing linguistification" (Saatkamp, 1995, p. 70). This exclusive focus on language makes it impossible for Rorty to take seriously any of Dewey's theories about the importance of activity and experience. This is why Rorty naturally tends to see language as a self-contained entity, with no other criterion for evaluation other than the agreement of the community in which the language is spoken. For Rorty, one of the consequences of pragmatism is that there is no world that exists outside of our language. (And because Rorty believes that all thought is linguistic, this also means that there is no world that exists outside of our thought.) This is what he means when he refers to a "world well lost" in the title of chapter 2 in Rorty 1982. This is why Rorty concludes that if there is a consensus that our language is accurate, it must be accurate,

because supposedly there is no world outside of our language which the language is required to describe.

Putnam, as I mentioned earlier, refuses to accept this position because he believes (I think correctly) that it is self-contradictory. He therefore claims that we have no choice but to accept some form of realism. However, the third alternative I describe above is pragmatist, rather than realist, and can be extrapolated from one of Putnam's more famous aphorisms. "The mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world" (Putnam, 1981, p. xi).

Putnam is here proposing a concept of "world" which may seem counter intuitive at first, but there is justification for this usage in ordinary language (as well as in the writings of both Heidegger and Dewey). The word "World" does not always refer to something that is completely mind independent. Every conscious organism has an interactive, symbiotic relationship with certain parts of its environment, which arises because of the goals and activities of that organism. When we speak of "the world of commerce" or "the world of football" we are not talking about some particular acreage of real estate. We are talking about a network of activities which establishes relationships amongst people, places, and things. If we take Putnam to mean "world" in this sense, we could interpret his slogan as implying the following three statements. 1) These worlds obviously do not exist independently of the minds of the people who plan business deals and football strategies. 2) Yet these worlds are also not completely mind dependent—if people were only thinking about football, and not playing it on real football fields, the world of football as we know it would not exist. 3) I think Putnam would also accept that there is no thought without embodied activity in some sort of world (in agreement with Dewey and Heidegger, and in contradistinction to someone like Descartes). In other words, it would not be possible to think about football, or anything else, unless we had a world in which football and other activities could be performed. If we put all three of these claims together, we end up with the conclusion that the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world.

What Putnam might not accept, and what Rorty and I do accept, is that these kinds of worlds are the only kinds of worlds that exist. There is no reason to believe that there is such a thing as a world-in-itself, independent of all of the thoughts, beliefs and activities of conscious beings. To be a pragmatist means to live and think with the metaphysical assumption that such a world does not exist, and that it is a world well lost. Those who refuse to accept this kind of pragmatism call themselves realists, but there is nothing realistic about their position if in fact the world-in-itself does not exist. Searle defends this kind of "realism" by distinguishing socially constructed reality (which for him includes the worlds described by biology, economics, and every other science except physics) from the world in itself (which is described



by physics). I believe, and I imagine that Rorty agrees with me, that this distinction is a completely unjustified privileging of the activities of physicists over the activities of everyone else. I think Putnam would have almost as much problem with Searle's "realism" as Rorty and I would, but would want to claim that there is still some sort of world which is independent of human activity, even if the physicists are not the people who know what it is. But I think the only reason Putnam still clings to something like a "realist" world is that he cannot accept Rorty's claim that consensus among language users is the only thing that determines the nature of their world. Neither Rorty nor Putnam have considered the possibility that the world could be constituted by our activities, and still be distinct from what our language says about it, because language is not the only human activity.

Barry Allen makes a similar criticism of Rorty when he accuses Rorty of having a propositional and discursive bias in his critique of epistemology. But despite Allen's undeniable commitment to pragmatism, there is an unnecessary acceptance of traditional realism in his claim that "... brute causality limits what we can make and do in ways which unfortunately can have surprisingly little to do with 'agreements within a community about the consequences of a certain event'" (Brandom, 2000, p. 230). To some degree, the above paragraphs are a restatement of Allen's point, but without the assumption of a brute causality impinging onto human experience from the so-called real world. If the success and failure of non-verbal human activities is independent of our beliefs about that success, there is no need to posit a non-human "brute causality" to account for errors made by the linguistic community.

### *Dewey and Philosophical Questions with "Cash Value"*

Pragmatism claims that all human activity presupposes some kind of abstract theorizing, and abstract theorizing gets all of its meaning from its ability to guide and effect some other human activity. Consequently, if you want to do philosophy which has genuine cash value, you should find a human activity and analyze the philosophical presuppositions that govern it. Such an analysis can often reveal that these presuppositions cause errors, and suggest the possibility of other philosophical assumptions which might lead to fewer errors.

Are there any concrete examples of human activities that have benefited from philosophical reflection or suffered because of the lack of it? I will end this paper by giving one example of each. First, contemporary cognitive science arose because psychologists discovered that a bad philosophical theory had caused stagnation and dogmatism in their

discipline. This is why philosophers are now an active part of the cognitive science community. Second, this kind of analysis is precisely what Dewey himself did throughout his long career. Almost all of his "non-philosophical" writings can be seen as a "cashing out" of his abstract concepts so that they could be applied to some concrete situations. And his analysis had an undeniable impact on the practitioners of many different disciplines. One of the most dramatic and influential examples of this was when Dewey applied his pragmatist theory of knowledge to the theory of education.

### *Philosophy and Cognitive Science*

When we look at contemporary cognitive science, there is a strong sense that those scientists who study the mind have decided that there is a need for philosophy to supplement their work, and that contemporary philosophers are helping to meet that need. This awareness has arisen because psychologists experienced almost a half-century of behaviorist operationalism, and were acutely aware of the many problems that arise when one tries *not* to theorize. They had learned from bitter experience the inadequacies of the maxim "take care of the facts, and the theories will take care of themselves." They now realized that high level theorizing was a different skill from being able to design a good laboratory experiment, and that both skills were necessary to understanding their subject matter. Living through the history of mid-twentieth century philosophy of mind may incline us to share Rorty's sense that epistemological questions cannot be answered and/or that what answers you choose make no pragmatic difference. But when we see how the epistemological presuppositions of behaviorism misguided psychology, we can see that the epistemology you choose can make a great deal of difference indeed. We can also see that an epistemology that claims it is not an epistemology is a bad choice for purely pragmatic reasons. Laboratory psychologists have spent the last few decades cleaning up the wreckage left by the Skinnerian attempts to be operationalist, and what they need now is a metatheory about how to theorize, not reiterations of the old puritanical demands to refrain from theorizing. (For concrete examples of how operationalism led psychology into errors, crisis, and finally into "The Cognitive Revolution," see Baars, 1986).

In the days of behaviorism and positivism, the goal of philosophers was to make philosophy a science, or at least as much like a science as possible. In contrast, at least some analytical philosophers in today's cognitive science community have a sense that what they are doing is *different* from science and that this difference contributes to science's growth. I see several reasons for this change, mostly stemming from the discovery that the kind of analysis that had

been applied to ordinary language could be done every bit as effectively on scientific language. This discovery stopped philosophy from dealing with the same examples and problems over and over again, and it gave philosophy the right to say new and profound things, because science is supposed to contradict common sense. No one would ever attempt to dismiss the expanding universe theory by saying "that is not what we mean by space." The Churchland's critique of folk psychology was especially revolutionary in this way; thanks to their arguments, common sense became something to be explained away, rather than the court of last appeal. This is essentially the same attitude that Heidegger has towards *durchschnittlich* (the average everyday), and which Dewey has to the prereflective activities that constitute human experience. Heidegger believes that fundamental ontology will provide the explanatory context that will transform everyday experience. Dewey and the Churchlands believe that it is science (for the Churchlands, neuroscience) that will produce this transformation. But despite the numerous differences amongst their philosophies, the Churchlands, Dewey, and Heidegger all agree that it is essential for philosophers to come up with new theories about the nature of mind and the self, and to abandon the cautious modesty that prompted so many people to think of analytic philosophy as trivial.

Quine realized (although he did not always stress it) that his talk about the need to naturalize epistemology also implied a need to epistemologize the natural sciences of mind. Although the philosopher has lost the right to prescribe *a priori* structures to the sciences, the scientist has also lost the right to think (as Skinner did) that it was possible to rely on a neutral observation language and forget about philosophical speculations. This was an essential implication of Quine's claim that belief in objects was every bit as theoretical as belief in the gods of Homer. Philosophy and science are now adrift in the same boat, the philosopher without his old transcendental foundations, and the scientist without his empirical foundations. When we keep all of this in mind, it seems that Rorty's Puritanism about philosophical abstraction is a quaint holdover from the days of the logical positivists, and inconsistent with his pragmatism. Because the logical positivists believed that each sentence was atomistic and needed no help from any other sentence, they could also believe that it was possible to throw away sentences above a certain level of abstraction and leave the concrete observation sentences intact. Pragmatism, however, (in the words of Susan Haack) "maintains that the notion of concrete truth depends on the notion of abstract truth, and cannot stand alone" (Haack, 1993, p. 202). It is an inevitable corollary of Rorty's Quinean-Sellarsian holism that every sentence gets its meaning from the other sentences that appear with it in a context of discourse. The web of belief is not a mosaic with independent parts, so to understand how we think we must also under-

stand the patterns that govern how the web is woven, and the meta-patterns that interrelate those patterns. Consequently, to refrain from philosophizing is not an option, those who do not consciously philosophize are doomed to presupposing a philosophy. As Sellars said "We may philosophize for good or ill, but we must philosophize" (Sellars, 1975, p. 296).

### *Dewey's Influence on Educational Theory*

Those of us who admire Dewey frequently wonder how such a profound and influential thinker could have disappeared so completely from the American philosophy curriculum. It is thus heartening to discover that there are places in American academia where Dewey's influence never faded. The readers of this journal are well aware of the fact that Dewey's "Democracy and Education" is still widely read in graduate schools of education. And the people who read it are not academic philosophers who are interested in finely honed metaphysical logic chopping for its own sake. They are people who want guidance on how to become good teachers and administrators, and they read this book because they find it helps them become better at the activity called teaching.

And yet almost every chapter is filled with references to thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, or Hume, and to the grand metaphysical questions they struggled with. The main theme of the book is that this philosophical tradition has made fundamental errors in its conception of what knowledge is, which, naturally enough, interfere with a teacher's ability to impart knowledge to students. From Descartes, teachers inherited the idea that it was possible for the mind to learn without involving the body. From Hume, teachers inherited the idea that knowledge consisted of discrete bits of information, and that learning consisted of stuffing those bits of information into the head. Dewey's alternative epistemology helps teachers to avoid those (and many other) errors, because it explains why they are errors. The fact that students today do laboratory work, go on field trips, and do numerous other activities involving embodied experience, is almost entirely due to the influence of Dewey's epistemology on contemporary educators.

In other words, *Democracy and Education* concerns itself with the sorts of issues that Rorty criticizes academics for being too concerned with in his recent *Achieving our Country*. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey does not "put a moratorium on theory" or "try to kick [the] philosophy habit" (Rorty, 1998, p. 91). On the contrary, he provides detailed critiques of, and alternatives to, traditional epistemological theories such as the correspondence theory of truth. (Which Rorty claims a good pragmatist should simply ignore, *ibid.*, p. 97). And yet *Democracy and Education* has managed to have exactly the sort of impact which Rorty has said such a book could never have. It has helped



non-philosophers become more skillful and effective in their daily activities, and it does so by talking about the implications of those epistemological assumptions which Rorty claims have no significant impact on real life. For how could anyone who teaches ignore the importance of the question "what is knowledge?"

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### Footnotes

1 In his reply to Putnam, (Rorty, 1993) Rorty also asserts that he is not a philosophical revisionist either, despite Putnam's claim that this is what differentiates their positions.

2 Perhaps Haack is acknowledging this fact when she says that Rorty's attacks on epistemology "would undermine not only epistemology, not only 'systematic' philosophy, but inquiry generally" (Haack, 1993, pp. 182-3). Haack, however, appears to be presenting this fact as a sort of *reductio ad absurdum*, and I do not know whether I agree with her about this. Lakoff and Dupre do not see these facts about language and biology to be cause for alarm, only for reform. My goal here is only to show that Rorty cannot consistently demand that epistemologists should change the subject when all other subjects are equally vulnerable to these criticisms.

3 The removed section indicated by dots in the above quote adds the phrase "as part of SCIENCE" and the word "science" is italicized the first time it appears in the original quote. The italicized and the capitalized versions of "science" in the quote are technical terms in Haack's epistemology. She uses "'science' [in italics] for the disciplines ordinarily called 'science' and SCIENCE for the broader usage, referring to 'our empirical beliefs generally'" (Haack, 1993, p. 123). Haack uses this distinction not only to make the point quoted above, but to criticize Quine for assuming that all SCIENCE must be *science*. (A criticism that applies equally accurately to Rorty.) Rorty obviously couldn't have dealt with Haack's 1993 *Evidence and Inquiry* in any of his works cited here, all of which were written several years earlier. But the fact that Haack has now created a detailed and precise non-foundationalist, non-a priori, epistemology is pretty good evidence (even for someone who doesn't agree with her theories) that there are still important things to be said about epistemology in an aposteriorist philosophy.